

ABORIGINAL POPULATION

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In the sample of 61 adult females, 22 women were nonfecund. As such the obvious female preponderance in the total sample is not of much value and the total picture of Onge population is rather that of decline only. Such a decline of the fertility of the Andamanese women has already been pointed out. 163

Of all the aboriginal population, the Onges are to-day the most widespread and have undoubtedly a very balanced sex-ratio. As regards the fertility, there is a gradual unproductiveness amongst all the aboriginal population. The Andamanese who are on the last legs of the decay, have the youngest child of more than 10 years. Nothing definite can be said about the Jarawas and the Sentinelese but they are also on the verge of their decay. 16

PROBLEMS OF THE ABORIGINES

Assessment of the socio-economic and cultural problems is always subjective and a true assessment is only possible through the first-hand intimate acquaintance of the aborigines. The aboriginal population of the world to-day present a very gloomy picture of stagnation or decay and the aboriginal population of the Andamans are undoubtedly sharing this dismal fate of decay. 161 177

Only after the impact of the people having better material attainments the problems of the aborigines have been aggravated that paved the path of total ruination of their socio-economic traits and also initiated their gradual numerical decay. Such evidences of decay only in the last few centuries are within view in the case of the American Indians which formerly having 268 groups have dwindled to only 67 groups now surviving when the rest have been wiped out. The case of the aboriginal population of Australia, Tasmania, Malanesian Islands and the others of southeast Asia present such a gloomy picture. The causes of such a decline have been attributed to the incorporation of vices and such social poisons as alcohol and opium, attack of venereal diseases, quick adoption of foreign customs and modes of life which have been proved incongenial in their own environmental context and also to the gradual 'loss of interest in life.' This loss of interest in life, according to Rivers¹ takes away from the people the desire to live and to shoulder the burden of life, with the result that mortality incidence goes high and the more obvious causes of mortality like new diseases, the social poisons etc, tend to have greater potency for

¹ Rivers, W. H. R.—Essays on the depopulation of Malanesia (Ed). 1922.

THE ANDAMAN ISLANDERS

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648 a furious aversion to foreigners. This hatred has been rekindled during the last hundred years by a number of unfortunate incidents, but at one time the islanders were favourably disposed towards seafarers passing by, if we are to believe Niccolo dei Conti and Cesare Federici, fleeting visitors to the islands in 1440 and 1569. They both wrote of the peaceful native canoes that approached their ships, and this is confirmed by other travellers, like the Italians Fra Odorico da Pordenone in 1332 and Giovan Francesco Gemelli Caresi in 1709.

Violent clashes with the coastal tribes only became frequent when the English began to take an interest in the Andamans as a possible penal colony. The first prisoners to be sent there were some Indians, in 1788. In 1796 the colony was abolished owing to the swift death of nearly all the prisoners from tropical diseases. The attempt was repeated in 1858 after a mission entrusted to F. Mouat, and this time the seeds of decline for the islanders were sown. Efforts were begun to approach the coastal peoples, and even, strangely enough, those of the forests, the now ferocious Jarawas. Some of these tentative overtures were well received, but once the islanders came to think they had been betrayed it was enough to rekindle the hatred of strangers which they have retained ever since.

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[192] The evidence obtainable from archaeological excavations shows that for thousands of years the people encountered by the English in the coastal areas were the sole inhabitants of Great Andaman, living by fishing rather than by hunting or cultivation in the forests. The Jarawas arrived later. Migration from Little Andaman, imposed in relatively recent times by lack of food, brought them to Great Andaman. Since the entire coastal region was already occupied, the new arrivals took refuge in the forests of the hinterland. There they were happy, for they found an abundance of wild honey and fruit which amply fulfilled their needs. A spontaneous equilibrium was established between the coast-people and the forest-people, and both prospered.

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563 The arrival of an appreciable number of foreigners in 1858 immediately changed the situation. The peoples of the coast, who were the most anxious to make friends with the strangers, paid for this fatal error with virtual extermination. When the foreigners had definitely established themselves, the coastal Andamanese - Arioto

Arioto

THE PEOPLE OF THE ISLANDS

in the local language, as opposed to the people of the interior, the *Eremtaga* - appear to have numbered between six and eight thousand. Over the years their place has been taken by more than thirteen thousand foreigners, most of whom were deportees, enjoying relative liberty as servants of government officials, farmers and foresters. The settlers, voluntarily or involuntarily, introduced the islanders to alcohol and tobacco, forcing them to turn to the foreigners in order to satisfy their craving. In the famous and extremely frank work of the English explorer M. V. Portman (*A History of our Relations with the Andamanese*, Calcutta, 1899) official letters are reproduced which give precise instructions in the matter to government officials. The result of these instructions was to transform the Arioto into alcohol and tobacco addicts. Syphilis was passed to the native women by the deportees, and from them to their men. When, a few years after the mass importation of prisoners, the government authorities became aware of the infection among the Arioto, not one of them had escaped. The miserable twenty-three survivors of the eight to nine thousand of a century ago show the ultimate result only too well, and their final extinction is imminent.

Before the advent of the new civilization, the Arioto had divided up into at least ten distinct communities, but without any true tribal organization. They respected a form of chief, chosen by tacit consent for his personal qualities rather than by name or by birth-right; but the chiefs acted merely as paternal advisers, to be respected in times of trouble, with no illusions of authority. No one commanded, and none obeyed: all were content to follow the whim of the moment, with no conception of social obligation.

When the foreigners arrived, there were five main groups of Arioto on North Andaman, the Cari, Chede, Cora, Jeru and Tabo. Another five groups were in South Andaman, the Balawa, Bea, Bogig-iab, Joi and Col. With the numerical decline of the Arioto, who had always been endogamous within their group, a tendency arose for the survivors to merge and inter-marry, so that the twenty-three alive today are in fact the result of the mixing of the northern and southern Arioto, and of these with Indians and Burmese. The chief of these twenty-three individuals is Loca, a name in itself an indication of this ethnic mixture. Loca means 'whiskers', and he himself has a moustache, whereas pure Negritos have no body or facial hair.

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